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Laura Warwick

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Designing Trust: the importance of relationships in social contexts

Dr Laura Warwick^{a*}

^aNorthumbria University

*Corresponding author email: laura.e.warwick@northumbria.ac.uk

Abstract: This paper draws on findings from a recent Doctoral inquiry to discuss the importance of eliciting trust in an initial engagement in a social context, how this can be obtained and what this means for Design practice. It suggests that the trust placed in the designer is more important than that placed in the approach, due to the necessity to demonstrate benevolence in order to elicit trust, which can only be perceived in the actions of the designer. It presents a model that demonstrates the links in the relationship between designer and community, and their ability to co-design value.

Keywords: Trust, Service Design, Voluntary Community Sector, Relationships

1. Introduction

As designers begin to use their practice to incite social change, they are more frequently adopting the position of facilitator, in order to put the power of change in the hands of those that it affects (Manzini, 2011). Acting as a facilitator both requires and generates relationships, which stakeholders need to be engaged in, in order to successfully co-design anything of value (Burns, Cottam, Vanstone, & Winhall, 2006), and new connections are often made as the result of being involved in the process (Tan, 2012). When a community is engaging with design for the first time, this facilitation, and therefore relationship, becomes critical to ensuring the meaningful involvement of multiple stakeholder groups (Author, 2015; Yee & White, 2016).

Despite their importance, relationships and how they are formed in social design projects, has not been given the same attention as the tools and techniques of the approach itself. Research related to this topic has mainly focused on empathy and its different forms (e.g. Goleman, 2007; Kimbell, 2013; Kouprie & Visser, 2009, Young, 2014), types of intelligence such as 'emotional' (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and 'social' (Goleman, 2006, p. 101) and the role of the Designer in such projects (Tan, 2012). However, amongst these texts and related discourse, the importance of relationships is often mentioned, but not explicitly explored.

This paper draws on a doctoral study (Author, 2015) that found the relationship established between the designer and community to be critical to designing value in the collaboration. More specifically, analysis of three Action Research case studies highlighted the importance of trust, in order to form such relationships.

In each case study, the designer was working with a Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) organisation that had not been exposed to or engaged with design approaches previously. Such a project can be viewed as one that creates both *risk* and *interdependence* between the designer and community; the two conditions that create the need for trust (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). The precise process and outcomes of design cannot be guaranteed in advance, creating risk for the organisation and thus a reliance on the designer. This dependence is returned, as the designer needs the permission and time to engage stakeholders, in order to create anything of value.

The data showed that *calculative trust* (where the trustor - the person imparting the trust - perceives the intentions of the trustee - the person receiving the trust - as positive) was required at the beginning of each relationship, in order to elicit the permission to co-design (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998; Williamson, 1993). It was also found that *relational trust* (trust that develops during the relationship from interactions that occur between the trustor and trustee) (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 399) was key to progress the use and application of design within each organisation.

This paper will discuss the importance of trust at the point of the initial application of the design process, how it was obtained and what this means for social design practice. There are no specific models on the development of trust in relation to design in social contexts, the nearest examples are those proffered by organisational discourse to support the discussion of the development of trust in these case studies. Mayer *et al.*'s (1995) model of trust is the most widely accepted in the literature, and its three aspects of perceived trustworthiness; *ability*, *integrity* and *benevolence*, will be used to frame this study's findings. The discussion will also make use of the distinction between calculative and relational trust to examine how the aspects of trust were elicited in the initial phase of engagement, and then, during the course of each collaboration. The paper concludes by suggesting the implications of these findings and what further research is required to increase our understanding about the forging of relationships in these contexts.

2. Methodology

This research aimed to understand the value of a Design approach in a VCS organisation through the active application of design in this setting (author, 2015). As a result, Action Research (Lewin, 1946) was selected as the predominant methodology, supported by a case study structure (Yin, 2003) to ensure generalizable theory.

The research was conducted within three charities in succession, hereafter known as Charity A, B and C, none of which had previously engaged with a designer. In each charity, a Design approach was used for an 8-week period to explore an issue of their choice. Although all charities had comparable income and all delivered public services, each had differing charitable aims and customer bases, so that the Designer's practice was not guided by any previous engagement, as is required by the Action Research approach (Lewin, 1946, p. 38; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011).

Data on the impact and value of the approach to a range of stakeholders was captured during, immediately after, and in the year following the engagement through: semi-structured interviews; project meeting recordings; reflection-on-action logs; and design artefacts (Author, 2015). An independent researcher interviewed project stakeholders at the end of the collaborations to ensure honesty and accuracy in the reporting of outcomes. Gathering data at several points of the project from multiple stakeholders enabled a triangulation of data that ensured validity (Jick, 1979, p. 602).

Once all collaborations were conducted, all case study data was analysed using a four-stage inductive analysis process (Thomas, 2006). The first-stage involved 'cleaning' the data (Miles & Huberman,

1994, p. 51) by converting it into a common format and placing in chronological order. The second-stage involved hand-coding of the data in relation to the study's evaluation objectives and encoding each related excerpt of text.

In the third stage, all excerpts of text were then copied onto 'post-its' to allow for the creation of multiple coding collections (Guldbrandsen, 2006) by grouping similar quotes related to the same critical event across each case's timeline. The correlation of activities across project stakeholders, data collection methods and the project timeline also helped to ensure the critical events were objectively identified (Crisp, Green Lister, & Dutton, 2005). Finally, these multiple coding collections were compared and contrasted across stakeholders, timelines and cases to isolate common categories (Author, 2015). These were then grouped and reduced to identify themes (Silverman, 2006, p. 307) and patterns (Reichert, 2007, p. 221).

The derived patterns were then discussed in peer reviews with both VCS and Design communities to validate them due to my dual position of designer and researcher (Author, 2015).

3. Findings

Although these findings relate to the relationships that preceded and permitted the design activity in each case, it is worth noting that these acted as a platform for positive outcomes for each charity. The main outcomes for the charities were (1) more customer-focused services and (2) organisational learning, which in two of the three charities resulted in transformational change (more details can be found in Author, 2015).

3.1 Trust in the ability of the designer and the design approach

Mayer *et al.*, (1995) define the first of the factors in perceived trustworthiness as ability, the "group of skills, competencies, and characteristics that enable a party to have influence within some specific domain".

The requirement for *calculative trust* in ability is clearly demonstrated in a post-collaboration interview in all charities. In Charity A, a stakeholder remarked: "I wouldn't say I was sceptical, but I couldn't see how it would fit in with a voluntary sector organisation really". This was typical of all stakeholders who described initial concerns about the amount of time and input that would be required to get value from the application of the approach.

To elicit calculative trust, analysis shows that I spoke about the principles of design and the role of the designer more broadly, before focusing on where the design approach has been successfully applied, specifically, trying to emphasise relevance to the charity's particular context. Where possible, I evidenced this by drawing on my previous experience to be able to give tangible examples. Not only did this give detail to otherwise abstract design tools and outcomes, but it also provided evidence of valuable applications of design in a charity setting. For example, at Charity A I showed the Business Development Manager some examples of new advertising that I had created for another charity to improve their communication. The adverts helped to demonstrate the value of the approach and my provenance as a designer, as she expressed her admiration for them and subsequently recognised that language can also be 'designed'; "the fact that you question the wording really rings a bell with me".

Drawing on this previous experience worked particularly well when there were similarities in the organisational challenges. For example, the fact that I had supported a BIG Lottery application at Charity A helped to evidence my relevance to the Business Development Manager at Charity B; "I

look forward to seeing your skills have an impact at [Charity B]". Where differences were perceived in the organisational contexts, the evidence alone was not sufficient to convince stakeholders of the approach's relevance, with one in Charity B stating that "[the designer] said she'd been working with [Charity A]... and I said we're a lot more diverse in our activities and provision".

The design process can be better understood over time as the activities and outcomes from its application help to improve stakeholders' knowledge of its relevance (Junginger & Sangiorgi, 2009). In regards to *relational trust* in ability, unsurprisingly, being part of the co-design activity increased knowledge in the approach, its potential applications and outcomes. In a post-collaboration interview at Charity A, one stakeholder said "I think I got more out of [the designer] being here and... what she's been able to show us [than just being told about the approach]".

In each case study, I undertook a design activity within the first few days in order to demonstrate design in a visual and tangible way. In Charity C, this was a period of design research with front-line staff, which helped the Marketing Manager to recognise the difference between design and their traditional marketing methods; "[the design approach] feels different".

As the stakeholders' knowledge of design improved, the analysis shows that their ability to select an appropriate problem space, and their confidence in that ability, also increased. In each project setting, this can be seen clearly in a shift from me requesting work, to stakeholders actively asking for my support in relevant design tasks. For example, in Charity A, a project stakeholder stated, "we managed to crack [the project brief] and once we did...it became quite clear how we were going to use [Design]". The tangible creation of value in each setting helped to simultaneously increase knowledge of the approach, and knowledge of its applications.

As well as impacting on their perceived ability of the design approach, successful applications of the approach increased relational trust in my ability. In Charity A, the CEO invited me to share the work at their network's national conference, which acted as vocal recognition of the value of my abilities and the approach to those in the organisation; the Business Manager remarked, "blimey, she's arrived!" Similar evidence can be seen across the project timeline at Charity B, and in a post-collaboration interview, one project stakeholder remarked that "as the weeks went on... everyone wanted a piece of her".

As the representative of this approach, evidencing it was often done concurrently alongside my own personal capabilities. Thus, in the post-collaboration interviews, numerous project stakeholders commented that they were unsure if the success of the collaboration was due to my own capabilities as a Designer, or design's tools and processes, or a combination of the two. In Charity A, one stakeholder commented that "at the end of the placement we were convinced that the design approach to setting up voluntary sector services was useful, but in the wrong hands it may not work so well." In Charity C, a stakeholder commented that it was my ability to choose the parts of the approach that "fitted the character of the organisation", which had made it so successful. Similarly, in Charity B, "you could have a pure methodology there and have a total 'numpty'... [but the designer] had the right attitude". In placing initial confidence in my skills, it then became hard for them to discern whether these capabilities were standard across design practitioners, or unique to me. As they had not worked with a designer previously, this is a logical point, but one that could be apparent in all first-time projects.

3.2 Trust in the integrity of the designer and the design approach

Integrity in this model “involves the trustor's perception that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable.” (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 719). Other relationship research cites the importance of integrity, with Gabarro (1978) defining it as character, and Hart *et al.*, (1986), who describe it as openness or congruity. In design literature, Potter (1980, p. 101) suggests a client will be concerned that a designer will be “able to look after his interests”.

In the case studies, *calculative trust* in the integrity of the design approach was evinced by a perceived commonality between the principles of the approach and the aims of each organisation. All the project stakeholders interviewed prior to the collaborations commented that the tenets of the approach, i.e.; customer-centricity and thinking differently about established issues, aligned with the current desire of the organisation. These affirmations can also be seen as evidence of their perceived trust in my integrity; that I would apply the approach in a way that complimented the aims of the organisation. For example, in Charity B, one stakeholder suggested that they placed more trust in my integrity as a designer, than in the integrity of the approach, stating “we didn’t know a lot about how [the designer] was going to bring it to us so we kind of let [the designer] lead on that”. The charities’ lack of knowledge of the approach meant that whilst they accepted its core aims, they had to place more trust in my ability to apply the processes in a way that befitted the organisation’s aims. As a consequence, there was little data that suggested the development of *relational trust* about the integrity of the approach. However, the post-collaboration interviews all suggested they still perceived this quality, being committed to using the design process or aspects of it in the future.

In contrast, there is extensive data related to the way that stakeholders continued to perceive my integrity throughout the project timeline in each of the cases. This is particularly evident in patterns in the data related to the way that I established the initial brief in each project setting. It is clear from the analysis that in the initial stage of each project, I looked to the organisation to indicate a pertinent problem space to address, and due to their lack of knowledge, the stakeholders sought my guidance to set the challenge. In a reflection log I noted, “[the CEO] wanted me to say what I wanted to work on, but I really wanted him to specify this”. The discussion and filtering of organisational challenges not only allowed me to establish a valuable co-design brief, but also helped me to demonstrate my integrity to stakeholders. The clarity on the areas that were suitable and those that were not, was clearly valued in post-collaboration interviews, with a stakeholder from Charity A commenting that, “[she] was very clear about where she could help and in the end focused on two or three key projects”. Likewise, in Charity B, a stakeholder said that a key strength of the engagement, “was having someone with a new approach who wasn’t afraid to promote it, but who was sympathetic to the aims of the organisation.” The evidence suggests that I demonstrated cognitive empathy (Kimbell, 2013) by understanding and being aware of the dynamics of the organisations and their stakeholders, and that this was key in eliciting trust in my integrity.

Data suggests that the stakeholders perceived my actions as honest and open, which is also deemed to be a key element of integrity (Hart et al., 1986). In a post-collaboration interview at Charity B, one stakeholder said that this honesty was crucial in gaining staff trust; “I think [the designer] had an open and frank discussion with staff and I think the barriers were broken down”. Another commented that sharing research findings also helped to gain the trust of staff as, “she did that very openly by saying that anything, any work she was doing was there to be fed back”. Although the sharing of the process and its outcomes is very much due to the participatory nature of the design approach, the evidence suggests that this was linked to my integrity, rather than that of the method. In Charity C, a stakeholder said:

“[Staff had] seen what [the designer] had been doing and because she was quite open about what she was doing as well, she circulated all of her reports, so after a week or so everyone knew it wasn’t anything scary and she wasn’t watching them and she wasn’t sort of writing down anything about the staff or saying they need to do this better.”

The visibility of the approach helped to promote and disseminate the value, as well as reinforce my perceived integrity. Similarly, my actions were also considered honest, as they followed through on the promises that had been made. For example, in Charity C, a stakeholder said that staff members were “happier that they were putting their ideas forward and they were being actioned straightaway”. Again, despite the fact that quickly creating tangible change is at the heart of the design process, the activity was associated by stakeholders more with my integrity, as opposed to design’s methods and processes.

3.3 Trust in the benevolence of the designer and the design approach

Mayer *et al.*’s (1995, p. 718) third and final component of trustworthiness is benevolence; “the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor... that the trustee has some specific attachment to the trustor”(Mayer *et al.*, 1995, p. 718)(Mayer *et al.*, 1995, p. 718). As such, in this context this feature only relates to the designer, and not the inanimate design approach. A designer’s benevolence would therefore be judged on their desire to achieve the best outcomes for the stakeholders, community or organisation.

Considering how *calculative trust* was established in these cases, analysis shows that basing myself within the organisation elicited trust, with one stakeholder from Charity B saying:

“We have had a consultant in that was in with us a long time ago but they just come in and they just go. You don’t really get to know them, you don’t get to trust them and I think for a lot of people that’s the problem as well.”

Likewise in Charity C, a stakeholder compared prior experience with consultants to this collaboration, saying, “[consultants] haven’t felt part of the family and part of the organisation... where [the designer] quite quickly... fitted into the organisation on a personal level”.

Being based within the organisation also contributed to gaining *relational trust*. As an outsider to each project setting, and due to the inherent aim of the collaboration to induce change, it would have been possible for project stakeholders to perceive me as a threat to their work or their roles. It was therefore crucial to demonstrate my desire to help and support them very quickly, in order to encourage vital participation in my work. Data shows I made a concerted effort to get to know and spend time with the team, including having lunch with team members and attending social events. Furthermore, I supported staff members in activities that were not relevant to the design approach, in order to demonstrate my benevolent intentions. Stakeholders at Charity C valued that I; “learnt to use the till within 10 minutes so that she could help out” and “got in there and scrubbed tables”. The value of this additional support was corroborated further when a stakeholder commented that the research was not passive, but “active observation and being part of the team which won a lot of trust and support from our front of house team”. As a result, I was also seen as pro-active; “I can’t stress enough how much she came in and hit the ground running” and “making a difference very quickly, it was easier to accept her into the team”. Being pro-active has already been linked to creating improved understanding, but it is also clear that it directly relates to how I was perceived as a member of staff, and so was a way in which I demonstrated my benevolent intentions.

Although becoming part of the team was clearly important, equally vital was positioning myself as an independent person in the organisation. One stakeholder in Charity C felt that this objectivity meant, “there was no threat, there was no anxiety, there was no bias”. A stakeholder in Charity B similarly said that staff felt able to communicate things to me that they would not have felt comfortable sharing with management, which was echoed by another stakeholder who said that, “people have opened up to her, they’ve been very honest”. In Charity C, they felt that my awareness of the organisational dynamics helped me to gain trust as I, “recognised that she could be seen as an agent of change and therefore quite threatening, but she managed to strike that balance between just being open with everybody and getting their ideas, rather than being threatening in any way”.

Although promoting the use of the design approach throughout the collaboration, the data shows that I was respectful of current ways of working, for example, I told Wendy in Charity A: “It’s not that I imagine I’ve got the answers or anything, but we could sit down and talk about some of the aims and the best way of making it happen”. Additionally, I was respectful by brokering the outcomes of the design work at every stage, noting in a reflection log; “I explained that it was a draft and I’d love to hear what they thought” and “the article won’t describe everything, but hopefully should give you a sense of what could be achieved, not necessarily what should happen”. This introduction was crucial to ensuring that service components were co-created, even when formal co-creation sessions could not take place, but also communicated that I wanted these to be as effective as possible for the organisation, thus showing my desire to ‘do good’. A Charity C stakeholder also felt that this desire was frequently communicated through my positive framing of opportunity, rather than problems, such as “you’re doing a brilliant job but maybe we could try doing it this way or have you ever thought of doing it this way”. At every stage, demonstrating my recognition of their skills, opinions and work pressures helped to build relationships based on mutual respect.

The foundation of benevolence at the core of my working relationships with stakeholders resulted in a genuine appreciation for my work and my presence in the charity; “I’ve found a real ally in [the designer]... I know she would help me”. A stakeholder in Charity B remarked, “in my three and a half years of tenure here, [the designer has] become one of the most trusted members of staff... I think that’s about her more than just the way she did things”, with a similar comment from a stakeholder in Charity C, “I think a massive amount of [the success] is [due to] her”. As previously discussed, project stakeholders were often unable to differentiate between values brought by the approach and those brought by me as an individual. However, the data suggests that stakeholders valued the empathic skills, and the social and emotional intelligence of the designer, as well as the professional ability previously discussed.

4. Conclusions

This discussion has taken a specific view of trust in relation to design, and there are limitations to the debate about how to elicit trust in social contexts, not least because the personal disposition of the project stakeholders to trust is not considered. However, the stakeholder commentaries have shown overwhelmingly that obtaining initial, calculative trust is a crucial step in eliciting the permission to commence the design work, which in turn enables the designer to create value and improve their knowledge of the approach.

It further shows that during an initial use of a Design approach, the designer’s trustworthiness was perceived as more important than the trust vested in the methods being applied. This is particularly important in the case of the perception of benevolence, which can only be apparent in how the designer applies Design, not the methods of the approach.

As well as demonstrating the need for relevant, comparable experience to evidence the ability and integrity of the approach, and of the designer, the study has also highlighted that there is a value in taking time to build strong project relationships, be it through design activity or otherwise. In resource-poor contexts, in keeping with social projects, momentum is crucial, and this suggests that the trustworthiness of the designer can help to create value more quickly. Tan (2012, p. 40) similarly noted in her study of 13 projects conducted as part of the Design Council's Dott 07 programme that, "many designers... could proceed without making design methodology as explicit, especially where high levels of trust were present as a result of a strong designer-project stakeholder relationship".

To communicate this succinctly, Figure 1 depicts a model that visualises the role of trust in achieving change in this context. This is the foundation of a model that describes the role of a designer in achieving transformation in these contexts, previously published in Author, 2015 and Author, 2016.

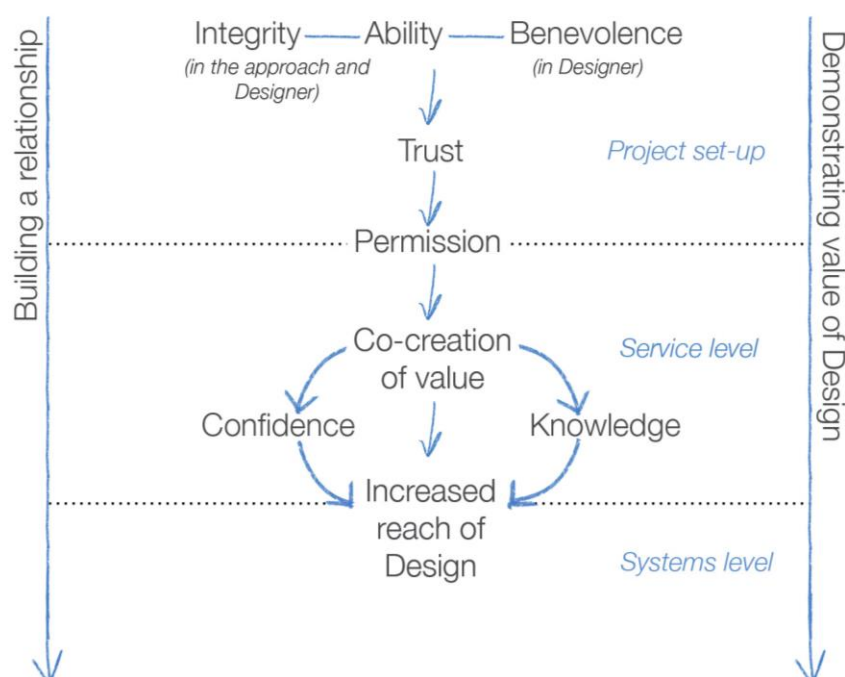


Figure 1: A model of the role of trust in achieving change in a VCS organisation in an initial engagement

The model illustrates the connection between establishing trust in the design approach (service design method) and the designer (relational), and the increased use and reach of the approach during an initial engagement. It also presents the aspects of the approach and the designer that need to be trusted.

However, acknowledging the role that the benevolence of the designer plays in this context, and the inherent link between that characteristic and their own cultural values (Akama & Yee, 2016), this paper does not suggest that the actions to elicit trust can be modelled or replicated elsewhere mechanically. Conversely, these findings highlight that much more needs to be understood about the different relationships that occur during the course of design projects in social contexts, in order to appreciate the different personality traits and designerly skills that are required.

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About the Authors:

Dr Laura Warwick is a lecturer in Service Design at Northumbria University. Laura works with regional and national charities to embed design skills within their organisation, most recently supporting Mind to create a Service Design programme to upskill their federated network.